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Images and the Colonial Experience in W. Somerset Maugham's The Casuarina Tree (1926)

Xavier Lachazette

1 W. Somerset Maugham, one of the most-travelled writers of his generation, often used the experience he acquired and the observations he made abroad as material for his fiction. Already in 1905 he published *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*, a collection of enthusiastic memories of Spain, a country in which he had spent sixteen months as a young Medical School graduate. *On a Chinese Screen*, a series of short vignettes, came out in 1922 after a semester-long stay in the Middle Kingdom. As far as short stories are concerned, his celebrated collection *The Trembling of a Leaf* came out after his sojourn in the South Seas. It is therefore no wonder that the five months in 1921 which he spent in the Federated Malay States ("F.M.S."), then under British rule, brought about the writing of another collection of stories, entitled *The Casuarina Tree* (1926).

2 Maugham affords a unique perspective on life in a British colony in the 1920s, in the sense that he was neither a settler, nor a British official, nor a "colonial" born of British parents in a Crown territory, nor a private individual with a sentimental stake in the country, like Kipling or Forster for instance, but rather an avid globe-trotter and keen observer of human nature. Moreover it is precisely the *British* experience overseas that Maugham sets out to capture in these six stories, likened to "a fine Oriental tapestry" by a contemporary reviewer[1] and which Maugham himself would call *exotic*, his definition being that such tales are "set in some country little known to the majority of readers, and [deal] with the reactions upon the white man of his sojourn in an alien land and the effect which contact with peoples of another race has upon him.[2]"

3 In other words, Maugham's personal detachment and set agenda, together with his dual background, at once English and French, seemed to warrant a fresh look at things Malayan and an original way of picturing them. Indeed, to take but one example, one can only be struck by Maugham's laying no store whatsoever by the country's cultural and historical heritage, nor by the native populations, the local customs or even the

settlers' professional activities, and by his choosing to solely illustrate the stress situations or innate failings which made the expatriate's experience a litmus test of human resilience.[3] But as I will try to show here, some of Maugham's idiosyncrasies, his source of inspiration, and the art of the short story he developed over the years tended to work against his uniformly conveying a satisfactory literary image of colonial experience in Malaya.

4 As shown by the notes which he took when he visited the F.M.S., a mere stay in that Eastern part of the globe sufficed to unleash Maugham's creative powers, with its press of variegated populations, its dense tropical vegetation and the strong daily alternations of sweltering heat and ethereal cool:

> Afternoon in the tropics. You have tried to sleep, but you give it up as hopeless and come out, heavy and drowsy, on to your veranda. It is hot, airless, stifling. Your mind is restless, but to no purpose. The hours are leaden-footed. The day before you is unending. [...] The cool of the evening. The air is soft and limpid. You have an extreme sense of well-being. Your imagination is pleasantly but not exhaustingly occupied with image after image. You have the sense of freedom of a disembodied spirit. (*A Writer's Notebook*, 206-7)

5 Something liberating about the natural environment allows, or forces, the European mind to shift its paradigm and envisage new ways of apprehending and representing reality. True, the settler's life *is* pictured as a hard one in this collection. He lives on his own or in a little white community which mistrusts the natives. His prejudices make him incapable of loving his native "wife" or the children she gives him. He suffers from the "Lord Jim" syndrome, and fears nothing more than acting as a coward or shamefully breaking down in front of the natives in whom his alleged white man's superiority should only inspire respect. The pettiness of his views and his intolerance unfailingly pit him against the rare white visitor who comes his way, as in "The Outstation," in which one settler's snobbishness antagonizes another's caddishness till death puts an end to their strife.

6 But contrary to what almost all characters unconvincingly assert, it is not the tropical climate which makes them lose their minds, take to drinking or commit murders, but a series of destructive feelings brought on by their personal shortcomings, the temptation to discard the iron corset of British conventions, not to mention the guilt and strain that "it puts upon a man to be an empire builder," as Harold remarks in "Before the Party" (163).

7 As two of the stories make it clear, previous literary descriptions of Malaya and Borneo are off the mark, putting forward as they do a "dark and strangely sinister" image of them when these territories are actually viewed by Millicent in "Before the Party" as friendly and fertile under a blue sky, sweet-smelling in the morning and balmy at night (160-1). With Conrad's "Lingard Trilogy" in mind,[4] Maugham has Doris, the protagonist of "The Force of Circumstance," reject the natural descriptions of the novels that she read in England and feel liberated by the open spaces and "smiling welcome" (253) that she discovers in her little outstation. Conrad's ominous rivers and impenetrable jungles are thus replaced with images of little white clouds which look "like a row of ballet-girls, dressed in white, waiting at the back of the stage, alert and merry, for the curtain to go up" (254).

8 By insisting that landscape descriptions should match actual sensorial perceptions, Maugham also voices his long-standing dislike for the conventional use of literary descriptions aiming to create atmosphere or dramatic mood.[5] In *The Summing Up* he

reveals his surprising distrust of literary imagery, which some critics have deemed evidence of a middle-brow approach to literature, when he alludes to the relief he felt after deciding to leave novels aside for the time being and to devote himself to the sole writing of plays. Passing the Comedy Theatre, where one of his plays was being produced, Maugham explains that he chanced to see a few clouds beautifully lit up by the setting sun, and that, though he enjoyed seeing such a gorgeous sight he couldn't help thinking to himself : "Thank God, I can look at a sunset now without having to think how to describe it" (116).[6]

9 The problem was that Maugham, though quite able to turn out touching or poetic descriptions of Malayan or other landscapes, as his notebook perfectly attests, was plagued by a sense of what he termed his "small power of imagination" and found the rendering of landscapes quite a strenuous task. As he modestly puts it : "I have been incapable of those great, sustained flights that carry the author on broad pinions into a celestial sphere. My fancy, never very strong, has been hampered by my sense of probability. I have painted easel pictures, not frescoes" (*The Summing Up*, 81).

10 But more than his allegedly limited ability in this domain, one could suggest that it was Maugham's methods of arriving at a story that thwarted his putting to paper the mental images evoked in him. Indeed, Maugham got much material from direct experience, from reading newspaper reports, and from listening to the stories which the locals were only too willing to tell him or his travelling companion, Gerald Haxton. But this also focused Maugham's art essentially on plot, and encouraged him to leave poetic and symbolic elements out of his stories, as unnecessary, or even harmful to the form's generic brevity.

11 A case in point is the story entitled "The Letter," a barely altered account of the actual murder of a Malay settler by his mistress after he left her for a native woman. This short story enjoyed tremendous success at the time and was converted by Maugham into an equally successful stage version. Nevertheless "The Letter" has little to offer literary critics, being, as one contemporary reviewer put it, "like crimes reported in the newspaper – sensational rather than strange."[7] Indeed this plot-driven, dialogue-laden narrative of adultery-cum-murder does nothing to heighten Maugham's reputation as an expert in the vagaries of the human heart. One may even regret the fact that the promise of a colorfully cosmopolitan outlook made by the opening paragraph – set in the busy streets of Singapore, "the meeting-place of a hundred peoples ; and men of all colors, black Tamils, yellow Chinks, brown Malays, Armenians, Jews and Bengalis" (1) – is not kept by the narrative. Instead, the only two Oriental secondary characters that play a role in the plot never go beyond the stereotypical image of the sly, corrupt, poker-faced Chinese on the look-out for easy money.[8]

12 It therefore seems that perfection of form, which Maugham believed to be within reach of the short-story writer if not the novelist, does not necessarily make for a great story. Especially, one could argue, when a writer deliberately keeps to a minimum natural imagery or metaphors and other tropes for the sake of a self-imposed truthfulness-to-experience principle, which partly deprives stories of their potential for tension, tends to tone down their poetic capabilities, and rather underlines the difficulty of turning anecdote into art.

13 As always Maugham was conscious of this limit to his art, and he later made the case that his being "very much at the mercy of [his] anecdote" changed in time to a situation in which he was able "so to arrange [his] material as to attain the result [he]

wanted."[9] This indeed seems to have been the case, but that two such dissimilar stories as "The Letter" and "P. & O." should coexist in one collection rather proves Maugham's reluctance to translate into art the images that are nonetheless the source of his inspiration. A passage from *The Summing Up* reveals his refusal to consider images as an inferior form of experience. Maugham writes :

> The psychologists tell us that with the ordinary man an image is less vivid than a sensation. It is an attenuated experience that serves to give information about objects of sense and in the world of sense is a guide to action. [...] To the writer this is not so. The images, free ideas that throng the mind, are not guides, but materials for action. They have all the vividness of sensation. His day-dreams are so significant to him that it is the world of sense that is shadowy, and he has to reach out for it by an effort of will. His castles in Spain are no baseless fabric, but real castles that he lives in. (*The Summing Up*, 226-7)

14 Yet as the preface to this collectionshows, Maugham was simultaneously attracted to, and diffident of, the idea of using the symbolist potential of images. When looking for a general title for his work, foregrounding the casuarina tree that is indigenous to that region initially struck him as a powerful idea (which it truly is) in that this single image encapsulated many facets of the colonial experience as he saw it. Local legends assert, Maugham tells us in the preface, that this tree is associated with contrary winds or perilous storms, with bad omen or dangers of various sorts, and thereby aptly heralds the instances of human misery or physical violence that the stories contain.

15 Another legend, Maugham continues, associates the casuarina tree with mystery and prophecy, while a third gives it an intermediary role in the local ecosystem. Allegedly, once the mangrove has colonized estuary regions, casuarina trees tend to take over and fertilize the soil, at least until "the ruthless encroachment of the myriad denizens of the jungle"[10] causes their disappearance from the scene. In this Maugham sees a striking parallel with British rule in Malaya in the sense that, however serious and numerous their personal failings, settlers were mostly for him a group of average, honest people on a commercial enterprise or carrying out a pacifying mission in a formerly troubled country.

16 Unfortunately, as he later came to discover, this intermediary-position theory was not based on scientific fact. Though Maugham does not explain why, one might suppose that the fact that casuarina trees thrive in sandy soils and cannot stand to remain waterlogged for long makes their growth in mangrove areas unlikely. Nevertheless Maugham held on to his title because, as he pragmatically remarks, titles are hard to come by and the best ones have already been used.[11] More seriously, his preface also enlists the help of Rabelais' *Gargantua*[12]to make the point that symbols "can symbolize anything." Other metaphorical associations with that tree species are then suggested : it could symbolize the peace brought by British planters and administrators, for the casuarina tree often act as windbreak on Malayan shores ; or even the settlers' exile from England on the ground that such a hardy tree, "grey, rugged and sad," could remind them of a Yorkshire moor or a Sussex landscape.

17 In other words, meaning either too much or too little, visual representations or symbols have a way of twisting themselves around and of evading control which put Maugham off, as if the arbitrariness of projecting feelings or connotations onto inanimate objects irked him or struck him as contrived in a work of fiction.

18 Interestingly no such hesitation marks the comments which he jotted down in his notebooks, and one immediately perceives the difference between those comments and

the afterthought which led him to give his third collection such a title. It is easy to oppose the absence of actual references to casuarina trees in the six stories – unless Maugham has that particular species in mind when he alludes to "trees with feathery foliage like the acacia"[13] at the very start of Izzart and Campion's ill-fated journey down the river in "The Yellow Streak" (215) – and the strongly visual impression they made on him during his stay. Like a flimsy veil placed before his eyes, now altering now heightening his perception of reality when the veil was suddenly drawn aside, an actual row of casuarina trees provided him with a staggering optical experience :

> In front of the veranda were casuarina trees, and through them you saw the sea and the island beyond. Long after the sun set there was a blood-red glow over the sea and the casuarina trees were silhouetted against it. They were lace-like and graceful and unreal. The picture reminded you of a Japanese print. At last the fitful breeze swayed them a little more and there sprang into sight, only to disappear again, a white star.
> The casuarina trees were like a veil of phantasy that pleasant thoughts obtrude between you and the sight before your eyes. (*A Writer's Notebook*, 200-1)

19 Interestingly however, Maugham *does* occasionally resort to such protean images. He does so for instance when he creates a peaceful riverside oasis at the bottom of the Resident's garden in "The Outstation," whose sweet-smelling flowers and moon-lit trees first instill peace into Warburton's heart before denying him that same serenity a short moment prior to the murder of his hated rival. Breaking the previous Eden-like quality of his fictional garden, Maugham then switches to internal focalization to write : "The river flowed ominously silent. It was like a great serpent gliding with sluggish movement towards the sea. And the trees of the jungle over the water were heavy with a breathless menace" (86). At some point in most of these stories a quick reference to snake images is also used,[14] but most interestingly in "Before the Party," a story set in England and in which the horror of the protagonist's Malayan murder is gradually impressed into the minds of her parents and sister, before they all set out for a clergyman's garden party. Mrs. Skinner jumps into the corner of her sofa "as though she had been told that a snake lay curled up beside her" (171) when it is revealed that Millicent cut her alcoholic husband's throat with a *parang*, or short sword, similar to that which has been hanging like a framed painting over her couch for years, a gift from her deceased son-in-law.

20 What Maugham stresses in this story is the morbid strength suddenly acquired by familiar exotic objects (like a Malay sword, a toque with egrets' feathers or a wooden hornbill) when they are viewed in an unusual light. What Mrs. Skinner took to be mere knick-knacks or three-dimensional images of the boring colonies – objects/images whose name she did not care to learn and whose power she felt to be neutralized by their new English context, though they did seem to her "a little odd and barbaric" (146) – surprisingly spring to life and force her to examine the human and moral implications of the nation's empire-building effort.[15]

21 But the best illustration of the inherent moral implications of imperialism is to be found in Maugham's masterpiece, "P. & O.," in which a Malay woman casts a spell on the longtime companion who suddenly leaves her to start a new life in his native Ireland. Mrs. Hamlyn, a traveler on the same "Peninsular & Oriental" steamship and the story's focalizer, becomes obsessed with an image that she creates of this Malay woman, sitting on the steps of her deserted bungalow – an image whose recurrence gives the story a striking cadence, as if the seduction then desertion of the Malay

woman epitomized the evil that empires do. Though she boarded the ship in Japan and may never have visited the Federated Malay States, Mrs. Hamlyn's own estrangement from her husband allows her to picture the scene of Gallagher's departure quite vividly, both from an imaginary bird's-eye view that allows her to mentally picture the Irishman's complete drive from his bungalow to the station *and* from the Malay woman's perspective. The paragraph in question is worth quoting in full :

> Mrs. Hamlyn saw the bright and sunny road that ran through the rubber estates, with their trim green trees, carefully spaced, and their silence, and then wound its way up hill and down through the tangled jungle. The car raced on, driven by a reckless Malay, with its white passengers, past Malay houses that stood away from the road among the coconut trees, sequestered and taciturn, and through busy villages where the market-place was crowded with dark-skinned little people in gay sarongs. Then towards evening it reached the trim, modern town, with its clubs and its golf links, its well-ordered resthouse, its white people, and its railway station, from which the two men could take the train to Singapore. And the woman sat on the steps of the bungalow, empty till the new manager moved in, and watched the road down which the car had panted, watched the car as it sped on, and watched till at last it was lost in the shadow of the night. (62-3)

22 When Gallagher falls sick and threatens to die from unstoppable hiccup fits on Christmas Day, thereby spoiling the whole community's planned festivities, tension and a definite malaise settle onboard, making passengers irritable. The Malay woman's spell and image, together with the unaccustomed vibrations coming from the ship's forced engines, diversely affect them and refuse to "pass into each one's unconsciousness," as the narrator puts it (66), as if the community now found it impossible to repress its feelings of guilt and the disturbing images born of its colonial empire.

23 It is unclear how much of a moral, or a political, statement Maugham meant to make in "P. & O." After all Maugham was always vocal against the idea of writers setting out to "educate" readers. Though admiring of Bernard Shaw's talents, for instance, he never swerved from his conviction that short stories, novels or plays were no fit pulpits for propaganda or the putting forward of a political or social agenda. Yet in his assessment of Kipling's short stories, Maugham insists on the fact that, willingly or not, all writers necessarily convey a vision or philosophy of life which lends itself to all kinds of interpretations, *including* moral and political ones. For him Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills*, to quote an example, may well have been written by a young man who was dazzled by the apparent magic and elegance of the British rulers of India, but the fact remains that these stories can undoubtedly be read as an indictment of their power and a prediction of their fall.[16] What is clear, though, is that in stories like "P. & O." and "Before the Party", Maugham pushed back his usual, self-imposed limits and gave the reader new subjects to ponder, like collective responsibility and a questioning of the moral foundation of colonialism. More than that, Mrs. Hamlyn's staggering feeling of solitude and her final decision to forgive her husband's betrayal – a decision set in opposition to the Malay woman's fatal curse – prove that Maugham was considering broader matters even than the colonial experience, namely the human experience and the need for universal tolerance that it calls for, in the face of the leveling influence of death. Critics therefore cannot see the forest for the trees when they stress Maugham's irony or warped vision to the exclusion of anything else, as does Hartley when he writes of the "ruthless insight into and insistence upon the ignoble motives [which] distinguish these 'Plain Tales of the Ills.'"[17]

24 Similar in this to the reaction of Forster's Adela Quested when hearing a primitive echo in one of the Marabar Caves, Mrs. Hamlyn's experience on the ship boils down to a brutal reminder of the meaninglessness and ferocity of life, especially for those who, like her, feel "as lonely as the ship that throbbed her hasting way through an unpeopled sea, and lonely as the friendless man who lay dying in the ship's lazaret" (70).

25 Critics have occasionally deemed such images and notions in Maugham's fiction none too elevating or original. They are nonetheless some of the heart-felt convictions which Maugham arrived at after a life that was rich in experience and that he wished to share with his readers. As he writes at the end of a preface to his complete works :

> When he [the writer] succeeds he has forced you for a time to accept his view of the universe and has given you the pleasure of following out the pattern he has drawn on the surface of chaos. But he seeks to prove nothing. He paints a picture and sets it before you. You can take it or leave it.[18]

26 Note: The easiest way today to read the six stories contained in *The Casuarina Tree* is through the two collections of Maugham's stories quoted above: *Far Eastern Tales* and *More Far Eastern Tales*. Still, it is necessary to get a copy of the first edition of *The Casuarina Tree* (London, Heinemann, 1926, 310 p.) or a later edition like that published by Éditions du Chêne if ones wishes to read Maugham's preface (and postscript), not anthologized elsewhere.

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NOTES

1. Henry Albert Phillips's review of *The Casuarina Tree*, published in *The New York Evening Post* on 2 October 1926, is cited in *The Critical Heritage*, 174.
2. See Maugham's introduction to an anthology entitled *Tellers of Tales* (1939), quoted in *Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham*, 114-15.
3. In these stories, a contemporary critic heard a "droning symphony of fatalism that beats on the emotions like a tomtom [sic]." See Edwin Muir's review of *The Casuarina Tree*, published in *Nation and Athenaeum* on 9 October 1926; cited in *The Critical Heritage*, 171.
4. Conrad's trilogy comprises *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), and *The Rescue* (1920).
5. For a more detailed discussion on Conrad's and Maugham's representation of Malaya and Borneo, together with allusions to the works of numerous other fiction writers both in Dutch and English, see Alan Cheuse's "Reading the Archipelago."
6. Still on the subject of literary renditions of sunsets, Anthony Burgess writes the following in his introduction to *Maugham's Malaysian Stories* (xiii): "Faced with the task of describing a Malayan sunset, a "literary" writer feels called upon to throw words about as a painter throws paint – "an apocalyptical accession of hushed luminosity, the reds and purples and ochres blasting like archangelic trumpets" – that sort of thing. Maugham is content to say: "The sun went down. I went to the club for a *stengah* and a game of billiards.'"
7. See L.P. Hartley's review of *The Casuarina Tree* in *TheSaturday Review*, 18 September 1926; cited in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. Curtis and J. Whitehead, 169. I would certainly agree with Hartley when he states on the same page: "we do not think the author's business is finished when he has assimilated them [i.e., fact and event] into his private system. Even at the expense of mistiness and ambiguity he should surely aim at some larger, more impersonal correlation."
8. Caricature is *not* a characteristic of Maugham's fiction. On the contrary, Maugham considered caricature to be typical of "the old novelists who saw people all of a piece," whose "heroes were good through and through, their villains wholly bad" (*A Writer's Notebook*, 180). The point here, then, is that the use of stock characters negates the strikingly cosmopolitan opening of this particular story and lessens its attractiveness.
9. See his preface to *East and West*, the first volume of *The Complete Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham*; quoted in *Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham*, 57.
10. See Maugham's preface to *The Casuarina Tree* (Paris, Chêne, 1942, 7)and the "Note" under *Works Cited* below.
11. *Ibid*., 7-8. Maugham's arguments about symbolism and landscapes, to which I refer in this same paragraph, also come from Maugham's preface (Paris, Chêne, 1942, 8).
12. See the tenth chapter of *Gargantua*, entitled: "Of that which is signified by the colors white and blue."
13. The casuarina tree was originally named after the cassowary, the large flightless bird native to tropical forests whose drooping feathers the tree's twigs were found to resemble.

14. See for instance: "[Doris] wrung her hands, and her twisting tortured fingers looked like little writhing snakes." ("The Force of Circumstance," 270); Mrs. Crosbie [the murderess in "The Letter"] is "like a little bird paralysed by the fascination of a snake" (24).
15. The moral questioning which underlies Maugham's "Before the Party" (and "P. & O.") is reminiscent of a famous story with a similar title, published by Katherine Mansfield in 1922: "The Garden-Party."
16. Quoted (in French) in Frédéric Berthet's translation of the 1958 version of one of Maugham's essays on the art of the short story: W. Somerset Maugham, *L'Art de la nouvelle*, Monaco, Rocher, 1998, 72.
17. *Ibid.*, 169.
18. See Maugham's preface to *East and West* (the first volume of his *Complete Short Stories*), quoted in *Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham*, 64.

ABSTRACTS

Dans The Casuarina Tree, recueil de six nouvelles préfacées publié en 1926, W. Somerset Maugham évoque la vie des colons britanniques qu'il a croisés en Malaisie cinq ans plus tôt. Il s'attache aussi à montrer que l'image littéraire de ce pays, véhiculée par des auteurs comme Conrad, ne correspond en rien à la réalité qu'il a rencontrée. Pourtant, en raison de sa défiance envers métaphores et descriptions, de ses sources factuelles d'information et de l'art de la nouvelle qu'il s'est imposé peu à peu, qui laisse peu de place consciente au symbolisme ou à l'engagement politique, Maugham hésite devant la tâche de rectification qui le tente. Le présent article analyse cette tension.

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Xavier Lachazette is Associate Professor of English Literature and Translation at the Université du Maine, in Le Mans, France. He teaches nineteenth century literature, with a focus on natural descriptions in the novels of that period, and the short story. His publications include article-length pieces on nature in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, on otherness in W. Somerset Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen*, and desire in E.M. Forster's "The Life to Come" and "The Other Boat." He is currently at work on a book-length study of the short stories of Daphne du Maurier.